

Asian American Theater Company thriving

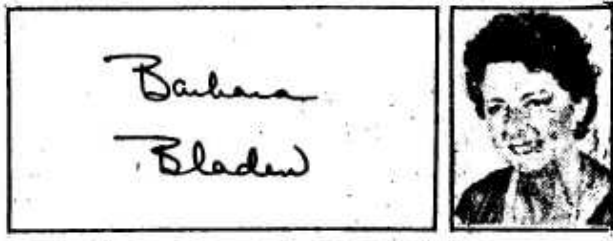
The Asian American Theater Company is still grieving over the loss of its performance space in the Richmond District, but its productions haven't suffered from the move to Fort Mason's Building B in San Francisco, where they're sharing space with 19 other members of People's Theater Coalition.

Audiences seem to have followed the company to the temporary new location because the theater was nearly full Sunday afternoon when there were a major ballgame on television and sunshine to enjoy.

Furthermore, the company's current production, "Once Is Never Enough," has been extended through Nov. 11.

The Sam Spade-type character from an earlier work "Yellow Fever," proved successful for playwright R.A. Shiomi, who won a 1982 Bay Area Theater Critic's Circle Award for best new script and four Bernies for the play that has since played off-Broadway and in Toronto, Los Angeles and Seattle.

So he took time out from working on a musical "Prime Time," a feature film screenplay about the internment camps and a television pilot called "The Moys of Mundale" in Toronto to collabor-



ate with director Marc Hayashi and Lane Nishikawa, an actor with the company who plays Sam in the current production. The result was "Once Is Never Enough."

In "Yellow Fever" Detective Sam uncovered a racist plot. In "Once," he deals with a long-lost love, solves the murder of a friend and keeps the redevelopers out of Japantown in Vancouver.

A veteran actor, writer and director of 14 Asian American Theater Company productions, Nishikawa holds the spool of the detective genre together with his cool exterior and seemingly hard-boiled cynicism.

He addresses the audience di-

rectly in a narrative that connects events and characters as the street light illuminates a scowling face wreathed in smoke from the cigarette that dangles from his lips.

His belted trench coat and dark slouch hat complete the image of an idealist detective who defends the little guy, is loyal to his friends, eats at the same skid row restaurant for 20 years and drinks his scotch neat from a bottle he keeps in his desk drawer.

The play is only intermittently funny, a line here and there, a quip or a comeback, but that's fine because director-actor-writer Hayashi doesn't mean for it to be played broadly. The humor surfaces like a motif as the

cast plays it straight.

The company has some fine actors, all of them with impressive credits, such as Jo Yang as Rosie the waitress, a compulsory role in any detective yarn. A member of Actors Equity, she's worked locally with AATC, the San Francisco Repertory, trained at ACT's summer congress and appeared with Ann Sothern in the "Duchess of Pasadena."

Her timing is keen and her voice appealing as she dispenses philosophic advice, an occasional bawling out and a spirit of independence along with her soup and coffee.

Sharon Omi carries the role of the wealthy, sophisticated Yoko, a woman of intrigue and danger, with ease. She's convincing as the femme fatale who is out of her depth when she gets involved with bigtime dope dealers.

Kelley Quon comes on strong as a spokesperson of the disenfranchised seniors who will be moved out of their homes when developers raze the Powell Street area in Vancouver to build luxury condos.

The plot situation and Ms. Quon's fervent enthusiasm and anger as Janice Suda brought back vivid memories of the International Hotel fight in San Francisco.

Chris Toomey clearly defines the tycoon stereotype, confident, arrogant, well tailored, cold and neurotically obsessive about cleanliness (he's always wiping his hands with a clean handkerchief, touching his finger to every piece of furniture and object with which his body will come in contact).

Ken Narasaki is in his 10th production with AATC in the role of Chuck Chan, a young, handsome, upwardly mobile lawyer who yearns to associate with the big money boys and savor some affluence himself, even if it means forsaking old friends and old values.

John Shin, who studied with ACT, has been with AATC since 1981 in a variety of roles and artistic positions.

For some unknown reason, he shouted all his lines, registering anger and frustration when it didn't seem to fit the character. However, he fooled me as an actor enough that I didn't second-guess the ending. That's to his credit.

Terry Chow and Mark Milinich come to no good by the end of the play but participate in some key scenes before they go. Milinich's slug fest with Sam is particularly effective. They were within two arm's reach of my seat, but I'd swear they were beating each

other to a pulp with fists and kicks.

Sandy Howell's multi-level set was kept simple but interesting by Jim Schelstrate's effective lighting design.

Music composed and performed by Don Nguyen heightened the mood of the delightfully acted and handsomely staged spoof with a jazz score of solo horn that evoked the gray, fog-

filled alleys and unlit seedy offices with only the glow of a neon light flashing on and off outside the windows that are as much a part of the detective genre as the trench coat and fog horns.

I recommend "Once Is Never Enough" for light entertainment by a consistently good theater group. It's here to stay and is gaining a national reputation for its original scripts.